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The Habits of a Mockingbird

BY W. OTTO EMERSON

THAT wild birds respond readily to human kindness is often heard of, but not so well known to many thru personal experience. A mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos leucopterus*) came about my home place here at Haywards in November, 1904, and took up his quarters for the winter in the top of a Monterey cypress summer-house. This was nothing new, for mockingbirds had visited the place for several years past. But this one began early to show unusual freedom about the south porch, where a young grape vine grew at the corner post and bore several fine clusters of fruit. *Mimus* must have thought these were grown for his special benefit, for he soon found them out and by his tameness let us know his approval.

There was piled some fifteen feet away a lot of prune-tree brush where Mocky usually took up his stand after a fill of grapes, and here on the highest



MOCKINGBIRD

branch he would sing, as if to pay for the treat. Should he detach a whole grape, off he would sail to the brush pile, showing those flickering white wing-patches and tail spread fan-like. Down he would dive beneath the brush where he would remain while eating the grape, and then come hopping out from limb to limb to an upper branch, wipe his bill, preen a feather or two, and sing a thanksgiving in tender sweet notes.

This continued until the grapes were almost gone. Meantime he had become so tame that I could set up my camera on top of a small table within three feet of his grapes and snap the shutter, without his showing alarm by even a twitch of the wing or tail. Neither was he alarmed by the appearance of the black cat, Nig, about the porch at any hour of the day. He only cocked his little head to one side as tho to say, "He won't jump for me; he has been taught better." In fact Nig did not take any notice of him, taking it for granted that Mocky had a certain right to hop about the railing unmolested, to which place the bird often flew before going up into the vine to feed.

It was not long before the question arose as to what we could do to keep him

around the house after the grapes were gone. My mother came to Mocky's rescue by tying figs to the bare vine. So after that he would come to the porch for figs instead of going out to the tree some fifty yards away from the house. If a fig should fall to the floor, down he would fly for it, swallow a mouthful, then grab up the rest as if afraid to lose it, and fly to his retreat, the brush heap.

Mocky had become so confiding that we decided to try for a closer acquaintance by fastening a fig onto the end of a wire rod twenty-eight inches long. He was accustomed to make his appearance on the brush pile first, turning this way and that with a flit of his tail, and then sail to the grape-vine or railing to look about for his food. I then held out the rod with the fig and he would fairly jump for it and eat all he wanted, then back to his perch to clean up his bill. Soon the figs were gone. It was then January and we wondered what next to offer him to stay with us. Again the good mother's ideas came into play. She soaked some big prunes, and sure enough he took to them readily; but they had to be tacked to a small table, provided for the purpose, to keep him from running away with them to his preferred dining-hall.

Mocky seemed to like my mother best as he would often fly to the porch rail and then over to the back of her chair. Some days if there happened to be no fruit in sight, he would hop over the porch floor looking all around, and it made no difference where we sat, to the table or chair-back he flew and in his silent way let us know that he wanted something to eat. Later, in the month of February we noticed Mocky one day as he sat on the brush heap, twitching his head and gulping as if to eject something from his stomach. A closer inspection showed him to be disgorging the hard kernels of the pepper berries. These seemed to form the bulk of his diet on rainy days.

His eyes were ever alert for bugs or other insects. He would make off after them much after the manner of a shrike; in fact, so much so, that many small birds around the brush pile would make a dive for its shelter, as if to save themselves from being scalped. One day a noise was heard, of whirring wings and harsh shrike cries. I got to the door in time to see Mimus darting off after Mr. Shrike just as the latter was flying up into the cypress house. These two birds had several pitched battles during the succeeding week. The shrike must have then deserted the grounds in despair because he could not master Mimus. The shrike may have been one of a pair I had turned loose several months before. I had had them caged for study, and they had remained about the place sometime after being released.

Mocky spent most of his time in the pepper trees and in the cypress house on rainy days, but on fair ones he would not fail to come to the brush in answer to a few whistles. He had gotten to know our calls and seemed to feel under obligation to answer them by making a prompt appearance. As the warmer days of February came on, his song was given oftener and grew more varied and sweeter. Maybe he was trying to call a mate from out of the blue, for when singing he would continually turn his head over to one side, looking up into the sky.

March 4 was one of those balmy spring days that moves the winter birds to restlessness. They will often tarry till evening and then between dusk and dawn depart for their summer homes. Our mockingbird was now bubbling over with his spring cheer; all day he kept it up; only it was a good-bye song. For that night he took wing for his nesting place, who knows where! The next day knew him not about the brush heap; it was silent without his melody; only the wrens, kinglets and sparrows were left to wonder why he had so suddenly deserted their happy band.

Haywards, California.